

AONTAS Community Education Network

Evaluation of CEN meetings 2010

1st September 2010



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Evaluation of Community Education Network Questionnaire

This short report outlines the main findings obtained from the community education network members' questionnaire which sought to obtain their views on CEN meetings for the period 2009-2010. The Community Education Network meets 3 times a year and in order to maximise the efficiency and relevance of the meetings the questionnaire was used to identify specific areas that could be improved or developed.

There was a moderate response to the questionnaire, a total of 17 respondents participated in the survey.

All respondents had attended at least one community education network meeting; the average attendance was 4 meetings. A number of areas were identified which encouraged members of the CEN to attend meetings. Of the 17 respondents who answered this question 53% stated the networking opportunity was particularly relevant, gaining information was also cited as significant (29%) whilst a third of respondents stated strengthening the community education sector and the lobbying aspect of the meetings have an impact on their choosing to attend. A place for reflection, the planning and productivity of the meetings together with the topic and context were also influential for encouraging attendance. Finally support, inspiration and also travel support were cited as important benefits of the meeting.

Reasons to attend:

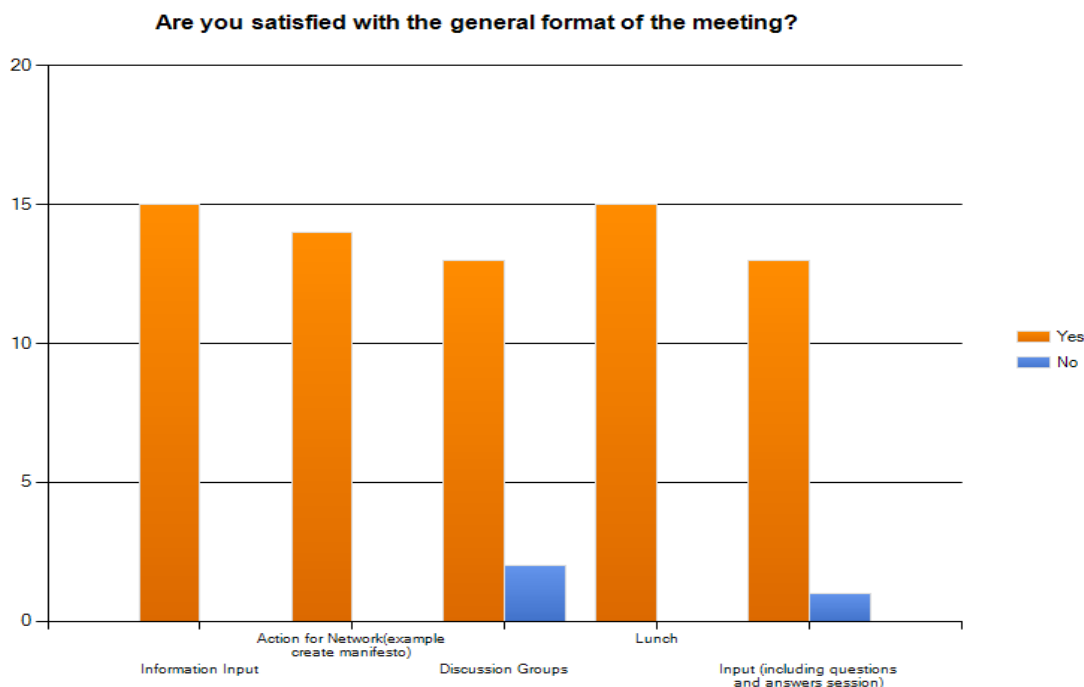
'The need for a National Community Education Network, for the purpose of lobbying and securing a recognised position for Community Education within the general Education system.'

Of the 13 respondents who answered this question 40% stated that nothing in relation to the meeting content dissuaded them from attending the meetings. Location (if outside Dublin) was cited twice as being a factor for not attending; also time required was also a dissuading factor. Lack of focus and the length of time spent on topics and building the network were also cited.

In terms of the internal work constraints which impact on members of the network attending meetings, of the 15 respondents the majority stated that the lack of time was the most significant factor influencing non-attendance at meetings. The impact of working part-time and the pressure that groups already face regarding human resources were also identified as having an impact on attendance.

From the 15 respondents who offered ideas as to how members of the CEN can be supported to attend meetings the following were suggested: continue to pay expenses, provide parallel online sessions, advance timing and send a letter of thanks to the manager of organisations for supporting their staff to attend. A third of respondents stated that the continued level of preparation of the meetings would be welcomed.

Regarding how the format of the meetings is viewed the following areas were highlighted, please see the graph below.



A number of respondents were satisfied with the day however, the main area for improvement suggested was to allow sufficient time for feedback, more time for discussions, start on time (even if people are missing), the inconsistency in attendees and pull the strands of the day together effectively.

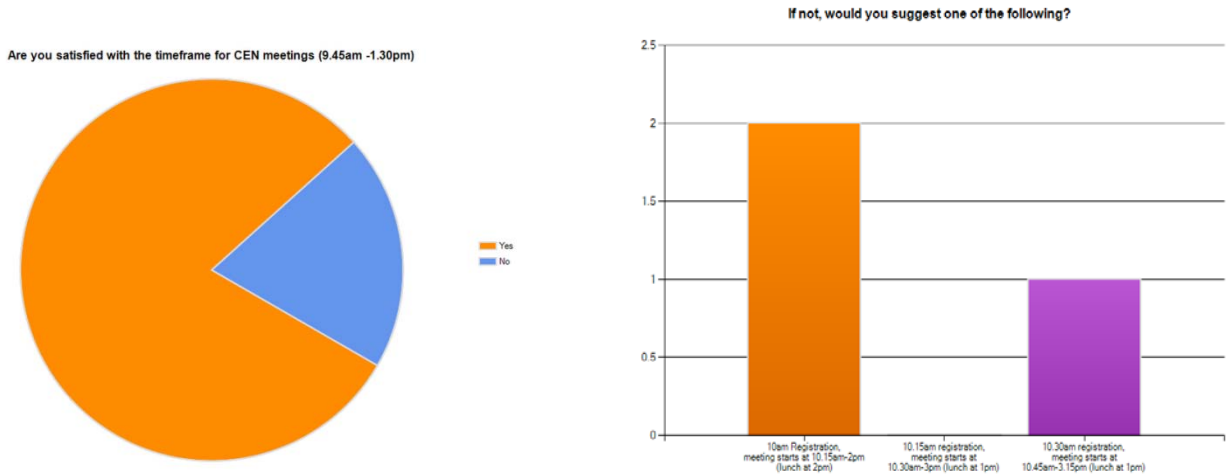
Suggestions for speakers were called for and 16 respondents proposed a variety of ideas:

- learning4life- www.llamau.org.uk
- Brian Harvey
- Peter Mc Verry
- Jane Thompson
- Representative from the Department of Education and Skills
- Representative from the Department of Social and Family Affairs
- Deirdre Garvey of the Wheel
- One relevant discussion topic for the day - e.g. calculating full cost of providing community education
- Someone to speak about marketing our services
- Someone to address the current changing roles e.g. VECs, FAS moving to Department of Education and Science etc, and how we can position community education within these new structures.
- A list of politicians from across the parties and Departments were also suggested.

Most of the respondents were happy with the methodologies used at meetings, however the following suggestions were made:

- Have a chair for each discussion group
- Group participants together according to their interests
- Have an online discussion forum
- Ensure acoustics are ok
- Invite an external person for an input

Regarding the timeframe for the CEN meetings of the 15 who answered 80% were satisfied with the timing. Of those who were dissatisfied (3) the following timeframe suggestions were made.



There were comments about the length of the day some stating it was too long and another it is too short.

Nine respondents offered suggestions for the next set of community education network meetings including: discussion on accreditation of informal learning, a focus on cuts, our campaign and how it will link with others, information on new initiatives, sharing best practice and professional develop and its possible impact on funding.

A number of respondents offered to participate in the meetings by sharing information, providing a rural perspective and discussing the quality assurance framework in the context of funding. Regarding the Carmichael centre, all 14 respondents were satisfied with it.

It was proposed that the main focus of the community education network this year should be:

- Sustainability
- Awareness of the community and voluntary sector’s shifting terrain

- Strengthening membership
- Contribution to the AONTAS Strategic Plan
- Maintain the ethos and heart of community education
- Lobbying
- Creativity of community education programmes for the newly unemployed
- Funding for community education and access for learners
- Represent the community education sector to the Government bodies
- Facilitate networking
- Debate with educators in the formal education system

There were very supportive comments on the work and organisation of meetings by AONTAS and the successes we have achieved so far. Finally the following point was also made:

“There is a need to highlight the problems relating to potential formalisation/globalisation (neo-liberal agenda) of community education. Two systems are emerging - Formal Community Education as a result of the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) Community Strand & FETAC and Civic Community Education which is being eroded because of the move towards equating it with FETAC levels. Funding systems dictate.”

Conclusion and proposed amendments

It would appear that the changes that were made to the timing, methodology and advance notice of meetings last year were warmly welcomed and has generally been successful. In order to further build on this work, the location and timing of meetings will stay the same for now, but as always they are open to change should the CEN members suggest it. There will be an increased time for discussion sessions, mainly focussing on one topic, with a facilitator assigned to each group. A greater use of existing online discussion forums will be promoted, currently the possibility of having a blog on the CEN section of the AONTAS website is being explored. Meetings will stay focussed on lobbying but will draw in appropriate speakers to events and allow time to share experience and to network.

Overview of logistics of meetings

- **Advance notice** of meetings was identified as important for facilitating attendance. In order to address this, dates for future meetings will be highlighted at the start of the year (September).
- We will continue to have meetings on a **Wednesday**.
- As most members are happy to have the meetings in **Dublin** we will keep this location for all meetings. Regional work carried out by AONTAS in the summer/autumn has closed the gap between members from across the country (including Limerick, Clare, Galway, Kildare)
- Due to its popularity we will continue to have meetings in the **Carmichael Centre**.

- We will continue to have meetings with the following timeframe: **9.45am registration, meeting starts at 10am-1.30pm (lunch at 1.30pm)**. We will start on time regardless of attendance.

Amendments to meeting content

- **Networking** was cited as an important draw to meetings, in order to increase the opportunity for interaction amongst participants we will ensure that the meeting's agenda will include methods for facilitating networking throughout the day.
- **Discussion** spaces will be facilitated and extended.
- **Information** sharing was also cited as important; we will use a blog to disseminate this information.
- In response to the **suggested speakers** for future meetings we will endeavor to have education spokespeople from the political parties, organisations with similar campaigns, inputs from CEN members and build links with the Department of Education and Skills.
- **Members** of the Community Education Network will be more involved in the facilitation of groups and providing inputs in order to maximize the skills and knowledge use of the Network.

Many thanks to all the respondents for taking the time to complete the questionnaire, the development of the community education network is dependent on the views of the members and we endeavour to meet those needs. If you have any further comments/suggestions please feel free to contact Niamh at the Office.

<http://www.aontas.com/commed/networkcen.html>